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Nebraska Policy Choices (1989): Preface

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POLICY CHOICES



Miles T. Bryant, Patricia O'Connell, and
Christine M. Reed, Editors

Center for Public Affairs Research
College of Public Affairs and Community Service
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EDUCATION

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**NEBRASKA
POLICY CHOICES:
EDUCATION**

NEBRASKA POLICY CHOICES: EDUCATION

1989

Miles T. Bryant, Patricia O'Connell,
and Christine M. Reed, *Editors*

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Robert L. Egbert
Deana Finkler
Michael Gillespie
John W. Hill
Mary McManus Kluender
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Nebraska Policy Choices: Education

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FOREWORD

On behalf of the College of Education, University of Nebraska at Omaha; and Teachers College, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, we are pleased to welcome you to *Nebraska Policy Choices: Education*. This volume is designed to help the reader consider education in Nebraska—its current status, strengths and weaknesses, and alternative choices for consideration by decision makers. The publication's ultimate goal is to serve as a catalyst for creation of an improved educational climate for the youth of Nebraska via presentation of issues and information.

Special thanks go to the Center for Public Affairs Research for conceiving the idea for this special edition on educational issues and for inviting us to collaborate on its production. We congratulate and commend the authors and editors for the fine thinking and writing reflected in *Nebraska Policy Choices: Education*.

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PREFACE

The eight chapters in *Nebraska Policy Choices: Education* represent the work of University of Nebraska faculty from both the Lincoln and Omaha campuses, as well as the University of Nebraska Medical Center. These authors participated in a unique effort jointly sponsored by the University of Nebraska Central Administration, College of Education (University of Nebraska at Omaha), Teachers College (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), and Center for Public Affairs Research (University of Nebraska at Omaha). Unlike earlier volumes of *Nebraska Policy Choices*, the focus of this volume is on one critically important area: education policy.

As with previous volumes, our primary goal is to focus on emerging issues—not necessarily those currently on the policy agenda, such as school finance and reorganization. The process of identifying those emerging issues began with a brainstorming session in May of 1988, attended by 30 individuals from around the state who represented a variety of perspectives and who came from different geographical areas.

Shortly after the brainstorming session, faculty from UNL's Teachers College and UNO's College of Education gathered at a forum to discuss the recommendations of the brainstorming group and to offer their own suggestions for chapter topics. As a result of these two sessions and further proposals from interested faculty, several strategic education policy issues were identified, and prospective author-experts were commissioned to write chapters for the volume.

The eight chapters included in this volume reflect the priority strategic issues identified by the brainstorming group and faculty—the increasing debate over who should control schools, the expanding role of schools as the educational system is asked to redress certain consequences of larger societal trends, and the appropriate purposes of the school system in Nebraska.

The volume begins with Robert O'Reilly and Donald Uerling's analysis of local education control. This chapter charts the tension between state and local authority over what happens in schools, and it discusses some of the problems that emerge from this tension. Among its

recommendations is that state responsibility requires continued school district consolidation.

The role of business and economics in setting the education policy agenda in Nebraska is a critical component of the issue of control. Miles T. Bryant lays out the relationship between education and rural economic revitalization and suggests that if rural development is a strong state goal, the educational strategy of consolidation needs to be coordinated with regional and community development realities.

James Dick and James Marlin review the history and scope of school/business partnerships around the country and in Nebraska. Unlike some of the more celebrated examples in larger, urbanized states, there are no examples in Nebraska of systematic use of business resources for education reform. These authors urge the business community to invest its knowledge and skill in community schools and, ultimately, in small community development.

Michael Gillespie's chapter develops a vision of education that contrasts with the views of schools as centers of economic development. While Dick and Marlin tout the economic development model and Bryant cautions against it, Gillespie points out the critical error that such approaches may make. In this chapter, Gillespie focuses on discipline-based art education and challenges all of us to question whether, in the pursuit of a competitive position in the global market, we have lost sight of the purpose of general education: enhancing people's capacity to make experience intelligible by the way they order and relate phenomena. Without a good general education, Gillespie argues, students are subject to manipulation by the media. Moreover, debates in the education policy arena may erupt without the participants being conscious of the different images or values driving their positions. This chapter's in-depth look at an innovative approach to art education in Nebraska suggests how to enhance the human capacity to interpret and critically evaluate life situations through the development of ways of thinking about images.

The next two chapters cover in detail the changing requirements and needs of the state's younger children.

Deana Finkler and Cordelia Robinson identify one group of children at risk: those experiencing biological or environmental difficulties that carry a significant risk of developmental delay. New federal legislation, P.L. 99-457, makes incentive funding available to states for early intervention services not only for handicapped infants and toddlers, but also

for children from birth through age two who are at risk for developmental delay. The State of Nebraska already serves this age group, but it must define what criteria it will use to designate children as *at risk* if it chooses to serve them. Finkler and Robinson lay out the new choices federal law will require state policy makers to make, including how to: 1) define the family unit; 2) foster inter-agency cooperation; 3) develop trained specialists who can work effectively in a cross-agency setting; and 4) solve funding problems.

Mary McManus Kluender and Robert L. Egbert highlight the factors that help or hinder opportunities for children to succeed in their personal, social and economic responsibilities as adults. Their research demonstrates that a strong relationship exists between what children experience during the early years of their lives, their academic and behavioral performance by the time they complete the primary grades, and the life circumstances they will experience as adults. They find that to be born poor is to drastically increase the likelihood of being at risk, and that early childhood education is the single most effective means for Nebraska to help children overcome the constraints of poverty.

Two particular areas promise to become more and more critical for education in the state. As the world grows smaller and as dominant cultures shrink, education will need to respond by producing a citizenry cognizant of the need to give all Nebraskans equal opportunities and rights. Helen A. Moore's chapter points out that, despite a public policy of equal education opportunity and a high overall secondary school graduation rate, racial minority and female students continue to experience subtle but pervasive discrimination. Moore's analysis of a statewide survey leads to the conclusion that, while citizens hold to a general belief in cultural pluralism, they resist specific curricular reforms needed to eliminate racism and sexism in the institution of elementary and secondary education. However, educators can be leaders in communicating to their communities the value of ethnic diversity and the contributions of women. Moore's chapter emphasizes the statewide nature of this issue, particularly as a result of projected changes in the cultural diversity of communities with an influx of immigrants, such as Norfolk, Hastings and Lexington.

John W. Hill's chapter on at-risk youth in a suburban Nebraska school district provides startling evidence that troubled youth exist in large numbers in school districts commonly thought to be immune from such difficulties. His study of junior and senior high school students suggests

that an alarming number of older youths at risk are capable of achieving at the national average; however, these teenagers are "failing" according to the norms of their college-bound peers. Hill argues that at least one-third of the teenagers in this suburban district are at risk for unproductive lives, and that their best hope is to stay in school, which will only happen if educators send the message that they are valued members of the school community.

We have many people to thank for the enormous effort that lies behind these pages. First, Katherine Kasten, formerly of UNO and now at The University of Northern Florida, provided essential guidance to the project in its early stages. Margaret McDonald Rasmussen undertook the difficult task of converting academic prose into a language more accessible to the lay community. The help of Russell L. Smith, Director of the Center for Public Affairs Research, was also instrumental. Finally, our faculty colleagues who gathered in early planning stages to brainstorm the content of this volume, and who subsequently wrote chapters, deserve our special thanks.

We hope that all who read this volume will find in it useful information about some part of the educational policy puzzle.

Miles T. Bryant, Christine M. Reed and Patrica O'Connell, *Editors*